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BY MEANS OF LETTERS

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
BOSTON, MASS., June 17, 1916

DEAR MR. HOSIC:

Here is the record of an experiment in teaching English composition which I think may interest the readers of the *English Journal*. It was conducted by Mr. Percy Marks, of our department, with a Freshman whose case called for heroic treatment. The difficulty was the not uncommon one of a man's being so shy and constrained and self-conscious that he could neither write nor recite without becoming so confused that he lost all power of controlling his thoughts and words. Mr. Marks hit upon the clever expedient of exchanging daily personal letters with the student for a few weeks, and he carried this exercise through with such spirit and sincerity and with such complete absence of the pedagogical manner as to work a transformation in the student's writing. The letters following, chosen from this correspondence, and the theme with which the student concluded the series, speak for themselves. I send them to you in hope that they may prove suggestive to other teachers.

Yours very truly,
FRANK AYDELOTTE

First Day

DEAR MR. MARKS:

I am starting out by disobeying you and writing a letter on Sunday instead of Saturday. I was in town all Saturday afternoon and had to take my "kid" sister to a dramatic recital at the N. E. Conservatory of Music in the evening. As I did not get home until quite late I decided to write today.

Now that I have explained my disobedience I will comment briefly on the recital. The participants were about ten girls and two fellows who were, I think, in the graduating class of the dramatic department.

As my knowledge of drama is very slight either from study or observation I can hardly comment on the excellence of the parts acted by the different girls (the fellows only appeared in the last number, a scene from Act II of *Martha*.—I copied this off the program), but the singing sounded good to me and the girls and their costumes were not at all repulsive. Their songs were of all sorts from just plain American childish to Japanese, and back to American Indian. Those of childish nature were sung and acted by a cute little girl who made them very amusing.

I have already run over the fifteen minutes in writing this enormous amount, so I will stop.

Do you happen to know anything about *vers libre*? You are more likely to than anybody else that I know; so you can tell me about that if you aren't too busy "balling me out," if you happen to be wondering what to write the patient. I happened to pick up a book of the stuff by Amy Lowell and I wondered if there could possibly be any method in her madness.

Yours sincerely,

DEAR MR. ———:

Your letter gave me a genuine surprise. I'll make a confession—I enjoyed that letter and I never expected to. I submitted my plan to you with no little trepidation, because—to speak frankly—I expected to be bored. I wasn't bored. I was interested and pleased. I apologize.

You ask about *vers libre* and incidentally Amy Lowell. Well, Amy isn't fair, but she is fat and forty! And her poetry? It doesn't deserve the name. It isn't poetry, nor is it even good prose. It's too "hashed."

However, Amy is by no means the worst offender. One Julia Stein writes other similar diabolical verses, and, oh yes, there is Alfred Kreyborg. Here is one of Alfred's:

Little mouse
are you
some rat's little child?
I want to love you if you are.

Isn't that lovely? Mr. William Eaton of the *Chicago Scoop* asks of this particular *poem*, "Is it not pure? Is it not sweet? Is it not indeed a touch of the oversoul? May one not love a mouse?—the little son-of-a-rat?"

Want another of Alfred's gems? Yes—well, here it is:

There were seven in all
 clothed in black,
 seven silent crows,
 standing
 not quite vertical
 around an ebony box,
 and in the box
 an eighth,
 lying quite horizontal.

How do you like Alfred? My opinion of *vers libre* in general may be summed up in two words, "damned nonsense."

I seem to be running on and on like the little brook. However, time doesn't permit more ravings. I promise not to write so much in the future, and under all circumstances, especially when you are reading my letters, I am

Sympathetically yours,
 PERCY MARKS

Second Day

DEAR MR. MARKS:

Spring seems to be making a pleasant little call at any rate, and I hope it can be persuaded to remain until the first of the summer. Another fellow and I were walking down Boylston St. and he happened to remark on what a great day it would be for tennis, just warm enough. It certainly was, and it was a great deal better than some of the days when we played last November. I don't suppose there will be much chance to play for quite a while yet, as the snow is hardly off the courts. I never played tennis until last summer but I am quite a tennis enthusiast in spite of the fact I have not yet stunned the mob with the brilliancy of my playing; quite the opposite in fact.

Beginning Wednesday we are going to have drill two hours at a stretch. I have always managed to get quite enough drill for one day in an hour, so I am wondering how two hours' grind will be. There is one compensation at least: I will only have to hook myself into that "bell-hop's" uniform once a week. There is another that I just thought of: if for some reason I am unable to go on Wednesday, I miss two hours instead of one. It would almost make one want to be ill.

I am wondering what you will write to me. It can't help being infinitely more interesting than what I dig up to write about. I have

not started to rave about a girl yet, but perhaps I will. I am looking for one for that purpose. It will be an entirely new subject for me, I assure you.

Yours truly,

DEAR MR. ———:

Your epistolary panegyric on spring and tennis strikes a responding chord in me. I am more than an enthusiast about both.

Spring has a peculiar way of affecting me. Somehow I never have any desire to pluck a daisy and write a lyric to it. I am quite satisfied with Burns's and Wordsworth's efforts in that direction. I don't feel particularly lazy, that is, not physically lazy; but how I do hate to give lectures and hold conferences at this time of the year. The honest truth is that I'd like to scrape an acquaintance with a trusty tomato can, and disappear for parts unknown. I love all the world in spring-time, and I want to get out into the fields where I can see life as it really is. And that reminds me of a selection from George Borrow's *Lavengro*, which I have just finished reading: "There's night and day, brother, both sweet things; sun, moon, and stars, brother, all sweet things; there's likewise a wind on the heath. Life is very sweet, brother; who would wish to die?"

I think that is the prettiest bit of prose that I have ever read.

And tennis! Well, I have been thinking about that, too. I'd rather play tennis than eat, and I dearly love to eat. You know, I come from California, and we are almost as accustomed to a racquet as you New Englanders are to a pedigree.

I didn't play very much last summer, as I was traveling in the West; but I am determined to develop a game this summer that will make my brother Native Sons look as if they were standing still. Oh yes, I intend to continue teaching—occasionally.

The suggestion that you might rave about a girl likewise strikes, or rather—sounds pleasant to mine ear. Advice on love, courtship, and marriage given free-gratis-for-nothing.

Sincerely,

PERCY MARKS

DEAR MR. MARKS:

Third Day

I found both your letters (I won't attempt verbal pyrotechnics at this point) waiting for me when I got home this afternoon, and I wish to say emphatically that you needn't be a bit sympathetic, for I enjoyed

both. Your dissertation on *vers libre* was good. I showed it to my chum and his two sisters and they all had a good laugh over it. His "big" sister, who is a senior at Radcliffe, said she might ask me for the letter for reference in writing a thesis on "The Tendencies of Modern Literature." Then she changed her mind and decided that she would think up some herself. I hope you won't feel hurt about it. It was she who had the Amy Lowell book I referred to.

I never heard of Borrow until today when I saw it in a story I was glancing over in *Collier's*. Then just a little while after I read your letter mentioning him. It is peculiar how such things come up. You hear of something through one source, and immediately after through some other source. I suppose there is some psychological (I think I've got most of the letters) reason for such occurrences, but I never sat up till three o'clock every night reading it up, as a fellow at one of the "frats" is said to do.

You wrote of making the acquaintance of a trusty tomato can and getting near to nature's heart. I like the idea but I would rather become acquainted with a trusty Ford minus most of its magnificent stream line body, and get where it is possible to commune with nature that way. Am I too matter of fact and lazy? If so, it is not a characteristic acquired just since I came to Tech.

Thanks for the offer à la Beatrice Fairfax. Seeing spring has come I may need it, but I have my doubts; I was never that kind of a boy. Thus endeth the third spasm.

Sincerely,

Sixth Day

DEAR MR. ———:

There is a sad plaintive note in your last letter, that makes me feel like a green-eyed monster. You seemed to be thinking while you wrote, "Ain't it hell? *But* I gotta do it. O damn!"—and so forth; but the purity of my mind doesn't permit me to conceive of what might have gone on in yours. But, seriously, do you hate this letter-writing so very much?

What I wanted to say to you this morning was this: I am more than pleased with the result of our experiment so far. In the first place, I am enjoying your letters thoroughly. That is an angle to the proposition that I never expected, and which certainly has given me a delightful surprise. In the second place, each letter that you write is easier and more natural than its predecessor. And last, but not least by any

means, you are doing something which I don't believe you thought you could do, and that is worth more than almost anything else.

My sleuthing? Well, maybe I shall tell you about that some time; but frankly, I am too blamed tired this morning. Night before last I was caught in *another* bridge game, and last night in *another*. However, I broke away before ten last night and read until after midnight. It was about two this morning that Morpheus came to my call. Please pardon that; but remember that I have just been reading Sydney's invocation to sleep.

So you think that cigarettes will stunt my growth mentally, physically, and morally. I'll think that trilogy over, especially the last one.

I am insulted! I almost forgot to tell you that. You ask if I am always so brilliant. And you have been in my class for two months, and have been corresponding with me for a week!!! *Sacré bleu!* It ees an insult. G-r-r-r-r-r!

Yours in a dumb rage,

PERCY MARKS

DEAR MR. MARKS:

I am glad that you told me what you wanted to see me for, because after that last letter I didn't know whether you would scalp me or not. I am afraid that that letter was rude in spots and I want to beg your pardon.

That trip was made, and it was some ride. The last time the car was taken out the metal strap that holds up the muffler was broken. This allowed the muffler to vibrate and made it tend to come apart. It is made up like a stack of tumblers with perforated bottoms, held together with two rods with nuts at both ends. These were not very tight even after I had tried to turn them up. We decided to start anyway, and let the thing rattle, which it did vigorously. After we got about six miles out I thought that I would take a look at it, and found that one of the nuts had gone, and another one was on the way, so that the sections were liable to come apart at any time. I thereupon took off the muffler, not without some difficulty and more dirt. When we started again the noise was not a rattle but a much more noticeable one—that of the unmuffled exhaust. I didn't mind that—it gave a sensation of speed—until I noticed in the distance the strong arm of the law in the shape of a traffic cop. I immediately got cold feet and slowed down, but the thing only made more noise, so finally in desperation I put in first speed and limped by the officer at about three miles an hour, giving an imitation of a car going

on two cylinders. All the way down to Allerton I attracted more attention than I ever did before. I suppose people thought I was some young daredevil giving an imitation of a speed fiend. However, I managed to make the trip home also, without getting pinched.

Hoping you may do the same, I am

Yours sincerely,

DEAR MR. MARKS:

Twelfth Day

I am writing this letter tonight before I start my nocturnal jaunt through the realms of study, so that I may be sure to have it done. I am fairly sure that I won't have to count sheep in order to get to sleep, once I close my eyes, and therefore sure this letter won't be written unless it is done now. I seem to be *quite sure*, do I not?

My chum has been spending the last few days in Scituate where he goes summers, but this not being summer he met quite a few of the town's celebrities (?) and is now solid full of town scandal, which he started to relate to me. Much as I wanted to hear it, I had to chase him home, thus putting off hearing it until tomorrow noon. Perhaps if I can't find anything else to talk about next time I will give you an expurgated account.

You have repeatedly assured me that you never, never, "blarneyed." But hadn't you better say, "Well, hardly ever"? If you don't, how am I going to reconcile what you said in your first letter about expecting to be bored but being really interested—and—what you said Saturday¹ about the first couple of letters not doing much to relieve you of your fear of the contract you had taken on. Oh, maybe I can explain it. The first was professional interest; the latter was human interest. Is it not so? Does that not explain the apparent discrepancy beautifully? Why of course! No, I am not sarcastic, merely gently ironical.

But I must get to work or my knowledge of "descript" will be too superficial for tomorrow's exam.

Sincerely,

DEAR MR. ———:

Fourteenth Day

I have just come from reading *Hamlet* to a class, and naturally I am "melancholy." But, honestly, I can't tell you how exhausting it is to try to reduce a three-hour play to a fifty-minute tabloid version. It

¹ Referring to a conversation.

demands an amount of concentration that leaves one like a very well-boiled mass of spaghetti.

I did something very unusual last night: I stayed home. And I want to tell you that I found the experience mighty pleasant. Perhaps I enjoyed it so much because it was so novel.

I want to ask you something so personal that it is well-nigh impertinent, and that is about your bashfulness. Bashfulness is something that I have never really understood, and I have always been curious to know how a person felt when in that uncomfortable condition. You say that you are often a prey to that malady, and I shall be very grateful if you will diagnose the disease for me.

Oh, before I forget it, I wish you would write a theme for me and get it in just as soon as possible. Suppose you write five hundred words on "The Benefits of Letter-Writing." What do you think of that? I really mean that you should discourse on our experiment. What does your family think of it?

Sincerely,

PERCY MARKS

DEAR MR. MARKS:

Your letter could hardly be called a letter full of nothing this time. About that theme: I do not think I can get it in before Saturday as I cannot, I fear, write it all Wednesday night, and Thursday evening is pretty full, so that it will have to be finished Friday. I have mighty vague ideas on how I will take up the subject but I will try to get something out of it.

You are giving me quite a little task when you ask me to elucidate bashfulness. As you know, it is acute self-consciousness which attacks me in the presence of certain people. In my case it is usually in the presence of girls with whom I am not well acquainted, but I think it *might* be called bashfulness when you feel nervous during an interview with some "high-and-mighty," for instance your English instructor or the Dean. But that is not so bad because you don't have to start any conversation. There are, however, some members of the "weaker sex" who do not talk all the time; in that case you feel as if you had to say something—but what? Probably all you can think of is some sarcastic remark that you are pretty sure wouldn't "get over" if you ejected it. So you remark on the weather and gaze on your finger-nails, find you're in mourning, and seek to hold your paws so they won't be noticed, which action calls attention immediately to them, and you blush and feel worse

than ever. So you sit or stand or walk and wonder why in the dickens something doesn't happen to relieve the monotony.

My family hopes that the next time I go away, as I did last summer, I will be able to commune with them oftener than twice in seven weeks.

Sincerely,

Fifteenth Day

DEAR MR. ———:

That's the best yet. Your description of self-consciousness is better than good. I fairly roared over it.

But, before I forget it—about that theme. Don't hurry about it. Any time within the next week will do. I want you to do a first-class job on it, and I'd rather have you take all the time necessary than submit a half-baked discussion.

I confess that I don't quite understand bashfulness yet; but as near as I can see, it is all due to lack of perspective. You don't take a good look at things in general, and they assume alarming and unnatural proportions. Take a girl, for instance. You realize your difference in sex, maybe consciously, maybe unconsciously. At any rate, it makes you a little diffident. You know that you must not swear, and that you must be careful of your choice of conversational topics; but that is really as far as the difference goes. Otherwise, she is largely interested in things that you are, and she certainly doesn't care whether you have had a fifty-cent manicure that week or not. Those ideas are "mere figments" of your imagination.

Your embarrassment with me is utterly absurd. Why does it disturb you to talk with me? I am not a girl, and I am not "high-and-mighty." If you will only get yourself off in a corner and inform yourself that your attitude is *pure damn nonsense*, it will evaporate before you know it.

Sincerely,

PERCY MARKS

Eighteenth Day

DEAR MR. MARKS:

I did not put my letter into the box today until almost eleven, so I suppose that is why I did not get any letter from you. I hope there is no other more serious reason—such as "dumb rage."

I hope to get my first game of tennis tomorrow afternoon *if* two other fellows have a chance to roll the court down and line it out, and if it doesn't rain, and if something else doesn't turn up to prevent it. I think I shall have to practice considerable before there would be any interest in a set between you and me, and besides you might get sore at my mediocre playing and flunk me for the term and, goodness knows, I couldn't stand that very well.

When I think of myself wondering every day what I am going to write my letter about, I wonder some more at how these magazine writers grind out so much. For instance, one that I noticed this week is Mary Roberts Rinehart, who has something in the *Saturday Evening Post* every once in awhile and other magazines also. Irvin Cobb is in the *Post* pretty nearly all the time, either with an article or a Judge Priest story. How do they do it?

Sincerely,

Nineteenth Day

DEAR MR. ———:

It is a very dizzy young man who is trying to write this letter. My eyes are doing a foxtrot with unusual syncopation. I am unfortunate enough to have gas in my room, and as the cord to my desk-lamp snapped three days ago, and as it hasn't been replaced as yet, my eyes have suffered.

You ask how short-story writers ever do it. The whole sum and substance of it may be expressed in one word—*work*—spelled with a capital *W* and very much underlined. Getting plots is easy—there are stories all around us. We are living stories every day. I could write a 5,000-word yarn about you without the slightest difficulty. The mere telling of the story is likewise simple enough, but the rewriting is the worst.

The reason you don't see stories isn't because you lack imagination particularly, but because you don't think about the things you see and the people you meet. Every person has possibilities as a hero or for a character study; every incident has potential qualities for a plot. Just as a great poet transforms a simple happening into the universal expression of a great truth, just so a story-writer must seize the commonplace and add the high lights through his skill in expression and the power of his imagination.

Sincerely,

PERCY MARKS

Twentieth Day

DEAR MR. ———:

Just at present I am in no mood to write a nice, pleasant, friendly letter to you. I had much rather get you by your young neck—and—squeeze *hard*! In other words, I would like to choke you!

Now listen here, young man, the next time I call on you in class I expect you to respond. Don't sit there and shake your head stupidly and act as if you didn't know the answer to my question. You are *not* stupid, and there is no reason in the world why you should not speak up and express your opinion. (I hope you took those Shakespeare sonnets to heart.) I really am exasperated. There is no reason why you should indulge in an ecstasy of stage fright. You are just as bright as any member of that class, and a good bit cleverer than the majority of them. Likewise, you have a good strong voice, and you might as well use it.

For heaven's sake, what was my last sentence in that letter? I didn't know what I was writing yesterday morning, and I certainly don't remember it now.

Please take the first part of this letter in the friendly spirit in which it is intended, and believe me to be

Sincerely yours,

PERCY MARKS

Twenty-first Day

DEAR MR. MARKS:

I have dated this letter the sixteenth, but it will be the seventeenth before I finish writing; and at that I ought to sit up longer.

I don't blame you for being exasperated at me, and I didn't feel any more hurt upon reading your letter than I did when I sat shaking my head stupidly in reply to your question. But honestly, I have never been so conscious of being stupid as I have been lately, especially when anybody asks me a question. Immediately, as if it were a signal, my brain seems to pull down the shades, turn out the lights, and sink into soundest slumber. Do you really think there is any ecstasy in feeling like a blamed fool, and do you think I revel in the thought that I haven't the nerve to attempt a recitation when I don't know what to say? Pardon me—but have another think.

Don't worry about my feeling "cut up" too much over your letter. I only wish your estimate of me were as true as the positiveness of your

assertion of it would seem to declare. This last sentence isn't English, and doesn't deserve to be because you will brand it as an admission of lack of self-confidence.

Yours sincerely,

Twenty-second Day

DEAR MR. ———:

I hardly know what to write you. I don't know whether I want to apologize or add to what I said before. I will say this much: I do feel genuinely sorry for you in your lack of self-confidence, and I am willing to do anything in my power to help you overcome it.

You *are* bright. I don't say that as a matter of flattery. You are liberally endowed with brains; but one has to dig pretty deep into you before you will permit him to find them. Your letters continue to improve, and in many ways I am proud of them. I am looking forward very expectantly to your theme.

Now, here's my plan. Our English class is composed of mighty pleasant jolly lads, among whom you can't very well be bashful. Likewise, there is no formality in the room. Don't you think that a good place to force yourself into talking? I'd like to call on you regularly and I believe that you will soon overcome your reticence. However, I hesitate about insisting if it is going to make you miserable; but I do think it would be good for you.

Please forgive me if I hurt you. Believe me when I say I mean it kindly.

Sincerely,

PERCY MARKS

Twenty-third Day

DEAR MR. MARKS:

Your fear of hurting me is quite unfounded. I am willing to admit that I have brains, or at least instinct enough to realize that I deserve all I get of that sort of reproof, and besides, your method of administering the medicine is infinitely more pleasant than the method used by some people; so I hope you will not feel afraid to "lay it on to me" whenever you feel it is necessary. That will be about all the time, I fear.

I played tennis Saturday afternoon (before I got your letter) and have been going around like a wooden man ever since. My chum set up a record that will be hard to beat among equally matched players: he

lost three successive love games and lost the first point in the next game, making thirteen consecutive love points. He didn't keep it up, for later in the afternoon he got a serve working that was better than anything he had ever done in his life, and beat another fellow and me easily, about 6-1. *But*, about three-quarters were deuce games, which is some consolation.

Yes, call on me even though I tremble already.

Sincerely yours,

THE BENEFITS OF LETTER-WRITING

DEAR MR. MARKS:

In the regular course of events it becomes necessary to write to you in a more formal manner; that is, to you as a teacher. In the last three or four weeks we have exchanged about seventeen letters of a most friendly nature, principally on rather light subjects, although your last few have dealt with a somewhat heavy subject—class standing. It would now seem advisable to consider the value of this experiment as a cure for lack of fluency in theme-writing, and as to its value in other directions. This latter is perhaps almost as important as an increased ability to write themes, and besides, the theme-writing part has not been conclusively proved. In my brief discussion I shall quote you where my judgment would not be conclusive.

As regards theme-writing, or in general any writing: Up to the time I started to write letters to you—nearly every day—I had never voluntarily written a letter to anybody. My letters were those that English teachers exact at divers times and those that I had to write to let adoring relatives know that I still lived long after they had decided that I had gone on a long voyage to a far country which had no postal connection with the rest of the world. Therefore a daily letter was a decided innovation, to be regarded with awe and no little doubt. However, I managed to grind out an epistle, and yet another, and then I got my first reply, and found it amusing. After that, I did not rue the bargain so much, neither did I have quite so much difficulty in writing, although at times I was somewhat at loss to find something to write about; nevertheless, I can say that the last letter was written in a shorter time in comparison to its length (two hundred and fifty words) than any other. As I gained speed in writing it became more natural in tone, and strange to say, to quote you, became better—more mature and more

skilful. Provided this speed, maturity, and skill can be utilized in theme-writing and in personal communications, there certainly will have been a real and direct benefit. That this benefit is real is easily seen when you think that it may now be possible to write a more coherent and "easier" theme or letter in half the time formerly taken.

There is another benefit from letter-writing aside from the gain in ability to write. That is the acquisition of personal interest. In this particular instance, although the personal interest was mutual, its benefits practically all fell to me. I, being burdened with a full supply of bashfulness, boneheadedness, and laziness, was the recipient of your earnest endeavors to draw me out; to show me the foolishness of self-consciousness, the non-existence of boneheadedness, and the advisability of the non-existence of laziness. Altogether I felt that you were genuinely interested in me, and were seeking to help me. If letter-writing were to do nothing else but increase people's interest in one another, it would be wholly worth while, and of course it is doubly so because of its twofold benefit.